



# News Release

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## **Drowning tragedies could've been prevented with life jackets and supervision**

**OLYMPIA** — Sparkling clear water in pools, lakes, and rivers beckon us to cool off on warm summer days. Often, that inviting water is cold, deep, moving fast, and can weaken and drown even the strongest swimmer.

“Life jackets save lives,” said State Health Officer Dr. Maxine Hayes, “and not just of children. In just two weeks in mid-July, three people drowned in northeast Washington near Spokane. That includes some young adults, and none were wearing a life jacket. Three young people have also lost their lives in Lake Tapps in Pierce County this year, and these tragedies happen all over the state. It’s sad, because drowning is often preventable, either with life jackets or adults supervising children.”

Public health, hospitals, law enforcement, local retailers, and Safe Kids groups statewide are working together to raise public awareness about the importance of life jackets. Most counties have [life jacket loaner programs](#).

“Of the 10 body recoveries out of the Spokane River this year, none were wearing a life jacket,” said Deputy Patrick Bloomer, coordinator of the Spokane Sheriff’s Office Marine Enforcement Unit. “There are well over a dozen cases where people rescued themselves before rescuers arrived because they were wearing life jackets. Those are just the ones reported to 911.”

Most – about 71 percent – of the more than 100 people who accidentally drown in Washington each year lost their lives in open water — rivers, lakes, Puget Sound, and the Pacific Ocean. About 30 percent of them were riding in a boat at the time. In Washington, 15-24 year olds have the highest rate of drowning. Drowning is the second leading cause of injury death for children from one to 14. And, for everyone younger than 50, drowning is the third leading cause of unintentional injury death.

Not wearing a life jacket and a lack of supervision for children and non-swimmers are important risk factors for drowning. Children and adults should always wear a life jacket that fits properly when on a boat or in and around lakes, rivers, and beaches.

Children should always be watched when they're in or near the water, whether it's the backyard pool, a lake, or a saltwater beach. An adult should be designated to be a "water watcher" who pays undivided attention to the kids. The watcher should stay where kids can be seen, heard, and reached quickly in the water. Non-swimmers should be kept within arm's reach whenever in the water. Avoid distractions like using a phone, preparing a meal, or reading. Children have drowned while surrounded by people because no one was actively watching the kids in the water.

About half of drowning victims didn't intend to be immersed in water. They were fishing in or near a river, riding in a boat, or wading. They slip or fall and are in unexpectedly cold or swift water. Drowning happens quickly and silently for non-swimmers who struggle once they're in water over their heads. They can't yell for help because they're trying to get as much air as possible before going back under water.

Some recent tragedies so far this year include a man and his young son who were canoeing on Lake Limerick. Neither wore life jackets, which were found in the empty canoe. A 14-year-old boy wading in waist-deep water at an ocean beach near Westport drowned after getting caught in an undertow. A 10-year-old nearly drowned in a Bellevue pool while swimming with friends. A neighbor noticed the boy wasn't moving underwater, pulled him out, and started CPR. Four adults and a teen capsized their fishing boat on the Snake River. The 14-year-old wasn't wearing a life jacket and drowned. A 24-year-old man drowned in the fast-moving Naches River after stopping for an impromptu swim.

Our [Water Recreation](#) website has many resources for staying safe in and around the water, along with beach advisories. [Seattle Children's offers several water safety resources](#), including information about swimming instruction and life jackets.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).